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Leza L Olson 09/07/2006 02:41:32 PM From DB/Inbox: Leza L Olson

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 003551

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SUBJECT: HAIFA AFTER THE ROCKETS

¶1. Summary. Two Embassy Tel Aviv consular officers made a post-ceasefire visit to Haifa, Israel's third largest city, principal port and for about a month this summer the frequent target of Hizbollah rocket attacks, to assess operations of our consular agency there and get a feel for how the city as a whole is recovering from the war. Following are vignettes gleaned from that visit. End Summary.

The Intrepid Consular Agent

¶2. The consular agent's lot is normally a peaceful one, accepting passport applications, notarizing documents and answering general visa questions, to lighten the workload for Tel Aviv's Consular section. But all that changed for long-time Haifa consular agent Jonathan Friedland when he returned from vacation to work July 16 and was greeted by salvos of rockets, including a hit on a nearby train depot that killed eight people. Later, another rocket took out a vacant house two blocks from the consular agency, in the city's smartly restored German Colony neighborhood. "We didn't think this could happen," he admitted. "You don't do this to a major city like Haifa."

¶3. As the rockets continued to rain down, Friedland stayed open for business, to post's utter amazement. He filed vivid e-mail accounts of the attacks and answered tons of calls from anxious residents (Most common exchange: Q: I'm scared to death. How can I protect myself from attacks? A: Leave town and head south.)

¶4. Looking back now that it's over Friedland, an imperturbable Yom Kippur War veteran, admits it was a bad time for the city, but not as bad as the wave of suicide bombings several years ago. At least with the rocket attacks residents after the first few days had a reliable siren warning system in place that gave them a minute or so to find a shelter, he said. The suicide bombings, in contrast, came with no warnings and left residents with a feeling of total helplessness.

The Green Deputy Mayor Sees Red

¶5. After paying tribute to the courageous Consular Agency staff, conoffs headed over to City Hall for a briefing on the city's response to the wartime attacks and their aftermath. Haifa officialdom has already perfected its pitch to the steady stream of official visitors coming their way to view first-hand the rocket damage they saw daily on CNN. The city has put together a slick, 101-slide PowerPoint presentation, complete with full-motion video and moving red arrows to trace the path of individual incoming rockets. Crisp, close-up photos detail dust-blasted living rooms, ball bearing riddled parked cars and wall-less upper floor dining rooms, with tablecloths flapping in the hot summer breeze.

¶6. There is other damage - not the visible kind but serious nonetheless - that the city is also facing. Deputy Mayor Shmuel Gelbard told conoffs the city is already in debt to the tune of about 50 million shekels (over USD 10 million) and counting due to war-related costs. The city's fiscal year runs through December and there is no telling how deep in the red it will stand by then. He said the city will look to the national government to pitch in and fill the gap.

¶7. Gelbard, an ardent Green Party environmentalist, has a particular axe to grind, in connection with the recently ended war. As he briefed conoffs on Haifa's response to the attacks and the status of its recovery efforts he segued into his personal agenda of making Haifa less of a target for future attacks by moving out its chemical industry facilities - most particularly a very large ammonia storage tank - and replacing them with his vision of a burgeoning tourism industry. He believes Haifa's industrial economy pollutes the environment and is responsible for excess deaths above the norm to the tune of 500 per year. The ammonia tank was a particular concern during the war due to a doomsday scenario that goes something like this: an incoming rocket hit on the tank would split it open, releasing the super-cooled ammonia that on contact with normal air turns into a viciously poisonous gas cloud that could kill thousands as it wafts across the city. Although the tank reportedly was drained of virtually all its contents during the war, to avoid just this scenario, Gelbard still feels the risk further buttresses his case for moving industry out of Haifa and bringing tourism in. He asserted that in such a swap-out, every lost industrial job would be replaced by three nice, clean tourism jobs. (Comment: Whether the three tourism jobs, weighted heavily no doubt towards table waiting, bed making and dishwashing, would pay as much, combined, as the one chemical job they would replace was left unsaid. End comment).

¶8. The debate over Haifa's industrial based economy in general, and the ammonia tank in particular, played out just after the war in a vitriolic exchange between proponents and opponents captured in the English-language daily, Haaretz. On the one side, a professor from Haifa's prestigious Technion - Israel Institute of Technology looked at a missile hit scenario on the storage tank. In vintage science-speak he said, "We referred to the wind directions - we took the percentage of residents and the percentage of vulnerability, and we came up with about 100,000 casualties."

¶9. The major general who heads the Israeli Home Front Command was having none of that. "We can go back to being a stone age country," he sneered, "avoid using these substances, in which case we will produce pitas with olive oil here, and hummus, like our neighbors - or we can have these substances and be a progressive country like Britain or France or America."

Underground Day Care

¶10. On the way out of City Hall, Gelbard took conoffs across the street to a modern annex building where, five floors below ground, a child care center sprang up in the building's parking garage during the war. With the ceasefire in place and the new school year about to start, things were winding down at the time conoffs visited, but it was remaining in operation until school began. At its peak, the parking garage kids camp hosted 200 children, producing a continuous ear-splitting racket as the usual kids' ruckus reverberated endlessly off the confined concrete space. This was about the only way to look after kids in a group during the war, outside of bomb shelters, since all the usual child care facilities were ordered

closed, to avoid the horrific possibility of mass child casualties if a rocket were to hit such a location. Israeli Defense Force soldiers were pressed into service in the garage as camp counselors.

¶11. Amidst parking spaces and support columns painted bright orange to remind inattentive drivers what level they were parked on, the city installed inflatable rubber play gyms, Moon Bounce trampolines and crafts tables. Across a couple parking spaces a movie viewing area on the morning conoffs visited was featuring "Bride and Prejudice," a recent Indian Bollywood offering about (what else?) a young woman who objects to her impending arranged marriage. Odd viewing fare for a clutch of Israeli five-year-olds, but they didn't seem to mind.

A (Steamy) Stroll Down Herzl Street

¶12. Next, Gelbard took his visitors on foot to a nearby commercial district. Leading conoffs on a fast-paced walk around heavy vehicular traffic in the torrid midday heat, he stopped first to pay homage to the traffic circle outside a downtown post office where shrapnel from a direct rocket hit on that building severed a woman's leg. "She's a hero," he said. "She's said she is going to walk again, and she is going to dance." From there it was just a short hop to Herzl Street, once Haifa's prime shopping thoroughfare but now decidedly downscale. Russian is as prevalent as Hebrew here. The stores offer no-brand clothes, money changing and cheap electronics. Several clothing stores feature male mannequins sporting snowy white leisure suits with pastel colored open collar shirts. The energetic, white-bearded deputy mayor clearly senses post-war opportunity here. Gelbard told conoffs he sees Herzl Street as a vehicle-free, pergola-covered pedestrian mall, teeming with coffees shops, bookstores and other decidedly upscale appurtenances. It's another part of his vision to turn the port town into something post-industrial, new age and therefore lower down on the enemy's target list. No room for leisure suits here.

The Shop-Til-You-Drop Cop

¶13. Wilted from the heat of that forced march, conoffs gratefully shifted to the air conditioned comfort of a police car, driven by a female Israel National Police officer, for a tour of the principal rocket attack sites around town. At the site of an attack that hit a medium-sized apartment building, tearing off much of the front exterior wall and producing several injuries, but no fatalities, a neighborhood resident stopped to complain to our police escort about all the war tourists, saying in Hebrew this "wasn't nice." Or words to that effect. Gelbard said a Chinese delegation visited the same spot while missiles were still flying. During their visit, the air raid siren sounded and he hustled them into a nearby shelter, where the stressed residents were surprised to be suddenly sharing their space with a group of bowing, smiling Chinese. Perhaps this was the origin of the neighborhood's war tourist animus. Our police escort was another story in herself. Over lunch after the tour she mentioned proudly that she had recently made a personal shopping trip to New York, buying USD 11,000 of merchandise for herself in one week. Must have been all that overtime she racked up during the war.

Inside an Immigrant Neighborhood - Some Happy Campers

¶14. After a tasty lamb shish kebab lunch, conoffs headed crosstown to the Neve Yosef Community Center, to see how the war experience affected one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. We knew Haifa's more affluent residents simply left town to escape the rocket barrage. (At the peak of the exodus, 30 percent of the city's 270,000 residents were gone. The city came up with this figure from a close analysis of domestic water usage data). But what about those who had nowhere else to go? And, how did the residents feel about their uneasy proximity to the aforementioned industrial chemical complexes? The controversial ammonia storage tank is clearly visible in the near distance.

¶15. This neighborhood has been something of an Ellis Island for

Haifa since the time of independence in 1948. First came newly arrived Jewish Brigade war veterans. They moved on and along came North African immigrants, primarily Moroccans. In the early 1990's it was the surge of migrants from the former Soviet Union. Now the neighborhood is made up largely of Ethiopians, who began arriving in the late 1990s.

¶16. For each of these groups, the Neve Yosef Community Center has been an assimilation factory, taking in newly arrived migrants, dazed, confused and disoriented, and turning out new Israeli citizens. The city of Haifa contributes some funding to the center's operation, but its big patron, judging from the billboard out in front, is the United Jewish Appeal of Northern New Jersey. The multi-story structure is the hub of neighborhood activity - adult education, crafts courses, computer labs for kids, field trips for young and old alike - and it was at the peak of its summertime activity when the war erupted. The center's general director, Moshe Hazut, said he and his staff sensed the danger of their situation immediately. The nearby chemical facilities no doubt were at the top of Hizbollah's Haifa target list, and their rockets were not entirely accurate, so the neighborhood was a sitting duck for near misses. This made it imperative to keep residents inside, in fortified shelters, for as much time as possible. His staff went through 40 apartment buildings in the neighborhood to check out and supply their shelters. Many of them had been neglected for years and turned into storage rooms, filled with decades' worth of junk. One team emptied and supplied the shelters. A second team ran activities for the occupants, to help pass the time while confined inside them. The center also organized day trips out of the war zone, to give residents a respite from the tension and danger. Ten carefully selected teenagers traveled to the United States, at the invitation of a Jewish day camp on the affluent north shore of Long Island (a/k/a Great Gatsby Country), near New York City. These very happy campers spent two-and-a-half weeks there living with local families, reveling in typical summer camp activities and sightseeing in the Big Apple. By the time they returned the war was over.

¶17. The neighborhood emerged from the war unscathed, at least in the physical sense. There were no rocket hits anywhere in the vicinity. The poor aiming of the rockets proved to be even poorer than they had dared to hope. The chemical facilities never were hit, and neither was Neve Yosef. But damage has been done on a deeper psychological level, according to Hazut, and that may take some time to heal. He has noticed a greater emotional fragility in the children. They act differently now. They cry, they're tense, they don't want to be separated from their parents. The elderly feel lonely and a bit shunned, sensing that in the wartime flurry of activity to take care of children and help their parents, they were just as scared but somehow overlooked.

¶18. The center is already at work on all of this, Hazut said. It re-opened almost as soon as the ceasefire took effect, to show everyone life was returning to normal. Counselors are encouraging residents to talk it all out and express their feelings. Given the center's long history of dedicated, industrious service to the neighborhood it's a good bet the psychological wounds of the recently ended rocket war on their way to healing. Just as the center for decades has shown newly arrived immigrants the way to settling into a new country, it's now showing them the way to get over the recent trauma and move on.

Conclusion: The Katrina Syndrome

¶19. Looking back on the long day's journey through the city, conoffs were struck by parallels between Haifa's situation after the Hizbollah war and that of the city of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina last year. In both cases the shock of a sudden, traumatic event brought to the surface long-simmering and very much unresolved issues. In Haifa's case, the debate is sharpening over its future direction. Should it stick with its industrial base, or should it diversify radically into clean industry such as tourism, both for environmental reasons and to diminish its desirability as a target in a future conflict? The war experience also highlighted economic inequalities, as those with means left the city for safety to the south and those without such means stayed and endured the almost daily rocket attacks. (Exception noted for the aforementioned happy campers).

¶20. Those issues will continue to be debated, and it's anybody's guess when, if ever, there will be a resolution. But this much is clear: as the wartime tension uncoils itself and life returns to normal in Haifa, public and private discourse can be expected to follow suit - marked by pride and defiance, fear and frustration, debate and derision, love and compassion. In other words, Israel.

JONES